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ABSTRACT

Thanks to Mario Untersteiner and those who followed his example, the talk about the Sophists can be heard not only in rhetoricians' hallways, classroom, and convention halls but also in the hallways, classrooms, and convention halls of philologists, historians, philosophers, and literary critics. Sophistical rhetoric emerged in a culture of competition and spectacles and was shaped by the ethic of competition and the aesthetic of exhibition. Rhetoric, in turn, influenced the culture in which it was produced by making it more aware of the competitive practices and spectacular uses of the word. The Sophists construed public discursive practices themselves as examples of competition. For the Sophists, to be an orator meant treating audiences to discursive spectaculars, theatricalizing the word, and giving it power by making it appear beautiful. The Sophists responded to Hellenic culture's sweeping change from aristocracy to democracy in the mid-fifth century by accelerating its rate and enlarging its scope. Sophistical rhetoric helped strengthen the newly instituted democracy by forging a mentality aware of the centrality of persuasion in the coordination of sociopolitical action, and the resolution of human conflicts. Rhetorical studies have taken a sophistical turn, and it is the task of contemporary rhetoricians to account for this turn. (Twenty-two references are attached.) (RS)

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The Possibility of Rhetoric's Early Beginnings

by John Poulakos

The Van Zelst Lecture
in Communication

May 14, 1991

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Foreword

The Van Zelst Research Chair in Communication was established at Northwestern University's School of Speech in 1981 with an endowment from Mr. and Mrs. Theodore W. Van Zelst. The rotating fund permits a professor to devote a year to research on an important issue in communication. The gift also provides for an annual lecture. This lecture, the dissemination of research findings, and the interaction of students and faculty with the visiting professor are designed to increase understanding of significant trends in the field of communication.

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John Poulakos is associate professor of rhetoric at the University of Pittsburgh, where he has taught since 1985. He received his bachelor's and master's degrees from California State University, San Jose, and his doctoral degree from the University of Kansas.

Professor Poulakos's essays focus primarily on the history of rhetoric, especially on the early Greek Sophists. His major essays have appeared in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, *Communication Monographs*, *Rhetorica*, and *Texte*. He is presently writing a book (University of South Carolina Press) tentatively entitled *Sophistical Rhetoric and Its Classical Receptions*.

Professor Poulakos has served as referee for various journals and as guest editor of the fifth volume of *Argumentation*, a volume devoted to sophistical rhetoric and argument.

The Possibility of Rhetoric's Early Beginnings

by John Poulakos

Delivered at Northwestern University, May 14, 1991

What has attracted me to the Hellenic culture of the fifth century B.C. is mostly accidental and biographical. But it is also the notion that if we are to clarify later times, ideas, and practices, we need to concern ourselves with the "beginnings" of earlier times, ideas, or practices (Said, 5). In other words, if we are to understand what we are, or what we might become, we need to spend some time considering what we have been. For reasons that will soon become clear, I will "begin" with the 1950s, then move to the present via a 19th-century detour, and then go to the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

Earlier Work on the Sophists

1954 was the year that Mario Untersteiner's *The Sophists* was printed in English. Up to that time, our notions of rhetoric were divided into two friendly camps: the Platonic and the Aristotelian. But we were approaching their rhetorics as the outcomes of thoughtful introspection, not as the results of specific controversies with real issues at stake. As for sophistical rhetoric, here, too, we were asking the wrong questions: instead of asking why it turned out the way it did, we were pondering why it was found unacceptable by philosophy. Consequently, we were understanding Plato and Aristotle *in themselves*, not as the antagonists of the Sophists, or as the initiators of two new rhetorics that sought to qualify, critique, and ultimately overthrow the rhetorics of their predecessors. In the '50s, however, all this began to change as the English-speaking world was introduced once again to a third rhetorical camp: the sophistical.

Even though Untersteiner presented the Sophists in the stiff terminology of philosophical "-isms," he nevertheless reopened the path to a maligned rhetorical tradition, a tradition that had seemingly been eliminated by the conspiracy of the good, the bad, and the tidy (the tidy, of course, being Aristotle). I say "seemingly" because sophistical rhetoric has never really been eliminated; on the contrary, it has always been with us, always ready to frustrate our search for stability, always ready to undermine our quest for certainty. Before the '50s this realization was not part of our disciplinary consciousness. But in the last 30-some years, we have seen a great deal of interest in the Greek Sophists and their rhetoric. So much so in fact, that one could argue that rhetorical studies have taken a sophistical turn, and a sharp one at that.

Untersteiner's attempt to introduce the Sophists into the intellectual sensibilities of modernity was not the first of its kind. Hegel had tried to do the same in his *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*. Likewise, George Grote and other like-minded historians

had argued in the mid-19th century that there was something more to the Sophists than Plato's unflattering portrayals and Aristotle's carping criticisms. Finally, Nietzsche had left no doubt about his admiration of the robust culture of the Sophists and his disdain for the utter decadence of Plato. However, none of these 19th-century views proved strong enough to penetrate the discourse on Hellenic rhetoric in the early part of the 20th century. With the exception of the feeble voices of a Bromley Smith and an Everett Lee Hunt, there was no talk about sophistical rhetoric in our field.

Today, it is otherwise. Thanks to Untersteiner and those who followed his example, the talk about the Sophists can be heard not only in *our* hallways, classrooms, and convention halls but also in the hallways, classrooms, and convention halls of philologists, historians, philosophers, and literary critics. Since the '50s we have seen an enormous number of articles and books on sophistical rhetoric, and more are coming out soon.

To suggest, however, that this wave of publications has caused the recent reemergence of sophistical rhetoric would be too simplistic. One can make a good case that it is not the *cause* of the sophistical turn but the *effect* of a profound dissatisfaction with the Platonic and Aristotelian versions of rhetoric. Either way, the phenomenon of the reemergence of sophistical rhetoric is too difficult to explain, partly because we are in the midst of it. For this reason, I propose to tackle something easier. Specifically, I propose to talk about the *emergence* of sophistical rhetoric and leave the explanation of its *re*emergence for another occasion.

Competition, Spectacles, and Rhetoric

The starting point of my lecture is that sophistical rhetoric emerged in a culture of competition and spectacles. When the Sophists started appearing on the Hellenic horizon, the highest form of competition was the Olympic Games, and the highest form of spectacle was the dramatic performances of the theatre. On the assumption that rhetoric is shaped and shapes culture, I contend that these two forms of institutionalized human activity influenced rhetoric by making it a matter of competition and exhibition. At the same time, I contend that rhetoric, in turn, influenced the culture in which it was produced by making it more aware of the competitive practices and spectacular uses of the word. Finally, I contend that this starting point is better than either the fable of Corax and Tisias (Hinks), or the account of Empedocles as the first inventor of rhetoric (Aristotle), or the story that rhetoric was invented by Plato (Cole).

Before going any further, let me point out that rhetoric did not "originate" with the Sophists or anybody else; in the Hellenic world it was being practiced before the institutionalization of the Olympic Games (776 B.C.) and before the first known production of Aeschylean drama (499 B.C.). However, it was not until the latter part of the fifth century that it started coming into its own as a self-conscious practice. And as it was coming into its own, it was grafting onto itself the competitive ethic and the spectacular aesthetic of its cultural surroundings. In so doing, it was adopting elements of prior works and practices, and it was giving discourse new faces and new meanings. As a new cultural form, sophistical rhetoric affected the intellectual, the social, and the political domains of its world profoundly.

Competition and Sophistical Rhetoric

Writing on the centrality of competition in early Hellenic life, Nietzsche asserts that behind the idea of contest one can find the desire for a second genius as a preventive

measure against genius. Whether in education, athletics, or public shows, the prevailing cultural ethic was the ethic of competition:

> To the Ancients…the aim of the agonistic education was the welfare of the whole, of the civic society. Every Athenian…was to cultivate his Ego in contest, so far as it should be of the highest service to Athens and should do the least harm….[T]he youth thought of the welfare of his native town when he vied with others in running, throwing, or singing; it was her glory that he wanted to increase with his own; it was to his town's gods that he dedicated the wreaths which the umpires as a mark of honour set upon his head.…But as the youths…were brought up struggling against one another, so their educators were in turn in emulation amongst themselves. Distrustfully jealous, the great musical masters, Pindar and Simonides, stepped side by side; in rivalry the sophist…meets his fellow sophist; even the most universal kind of instruction, through the drama, was imparted to the people only under the form of an enormous wrestling of the great musical and dramatic artists (*Homer's Contest*, 58–9).

In a more prosaic fashion, Richard Garner has recently endorsed Nietzsche's vision by pointing out that competition was "embedded early in the culture…and…spread to all areas of human activity," from war to the hunt, and from the debates of the assembly to the words within a sentence (Garner, 60). As Garner puts it, "Greek culture and social organization were replete with figures of competition and combat. In general, this was as true of the form of poetic figures of speech as of athletic and military struggle" (Garner, 58).

If we accept competition as one of the cultural givens in the Hellenic world, and if we assume a connection between rhetoric and the culture in which it is uttered, symbolic contests in a competitive social environment are to be expected. That the Sophists were adopting the competitive ideal in their rhetoric becomes apparent if we construe them as the heirs of the poetical tradition, as the recipients, that is, of the words of poets like Pindar, whose victory odes had elevated the athlete to the status of immortality:

> By poets wise that man is held happy, and is a theme for their song, whosoever, by being victorious with his hands or with the prowess of his feet, gaineth the greatest prizes by courage or by strength, and who, while still living, seeth his youthful son happily win two Pythian crowns. The brazen heaven he cannot climb; but as for all the bright achievements which we mortals attain, he reacheth the utmost limit of that voyage (Robinson, 96).

But beyond their poetical heritage, the Sophists construed public discursive practices themselves as examples of competition. That this is so is evident in Gorgias's reputed remark that a rhetorical contest "requires two kinds of excellence, daring and skill; daring…to withstand danger, and skill to understand how to trip the opponent. For surely speech, like the summons at the Olympic games, calls him who will, but crowns him who can" (Sprague, 82, B 8). In the same vein, the epigram found in 1876 in Olympia suggests that Gorgias thought of rhetoric as a polemical proposition: "No one of mortals before discovered a finer art/Than Gorgias to arm the soul for contests of excellence" (Sprague, 82 A 8).

Like Gorgias, Protagoras seems to have seen a connection between verbal disputation and wrestling and to have written handbooks on both (*Sophist* 232d-e). As such, it is no wonder that he should have thought diplologically, in terms of two versions of

logos (*dissoi logoi*) in contest with one another, rather than monologically, in terms of a single, uncontested *logos*. The link between sophistical discourse and competition is hinted at in the *Protagoras*, where Protagoras says that sophistry before his time was often disguised in various forms, athletics being one of them (316d-e). In the same dialogue, Protagoras refers to himself as a veteran competitor of rhetorical combats when he discloses that he has undertaken in his lifetime many contests of speech (*pollois ede eis agona logon aphikomen*) (335a). Accordingly, Socrates likens Protagoras to a fighter, and after hearing his comments on poetry, he says: "I felt as though I had been struck by a skillful boxer, and was quite blind and dizzy with the effect of his words" (339e). This Socratic remark is consistent with one of Protagoras's preserved titles, *On Truth or Refutations* (the Greek for refutations being *katabalontes* — literally, knock-down arguments).

The Sophists' affinity for verbal competition is well-attested by Plato. In the *Euthydemus*, for example, he tells us of Euthydemus's and Dionysodorus's love for eristic disputation, their use of words as weapons (272a), their interest in beating their interlocutors in debate, and their pursuit of victory at all costs. In the same dialogue (305b), Plato also refers to an orator as someone who excels in the contests of the courts (*ton agonizasthai deinon en tois dikasteriois*); and in the *Hippias Minor*, he portrays Hippias as a competitor in intellectual contests at the Olympic Games (363c-364a).

When put together, these bits and pieces of evidence make the connection between some forms of sophistical rhetoric and competition too suggestive to ignore. Basically, they suggest that the language of athletic events supplied a rich vocabulary for the discourses of and about rhetoric. Moreover, they suggest that the Sophists turned rhetoric into a competitive enterprise and, in so doing, upheld the agonistic tradition they had stepped into. At the same time, they suggest that the Sophists expanded the field of competition from the stadium and its athletic contests to the courtroom and its legal battles. To do that, they had to combine two heterogeneous elements, athletics and discourse, in effect creating a new amalgam, the amalgam that Aristotle would later call forensic rhetoric.

If there is one place where the drama of rhetorical competition was most intense, that place was the courtroom. While in the stadia one could witness well-trained bodies competing for an olive branch, in the *dikasteria* one could hear well-crafted arguments competing for large monetary sums or verdicts of life and death. In both arenas, however, the common goal was victory. In his analysis of victory in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle links courtroom scenes to athletic competition:

> Victory is pleasant; not only to those who love to conquer but to all; for there is an idea of superiority, which all [people] with more or less eagerness desire. And since victory is pleasant, combative sports and intellectual contests are pleasant . . . . [W]here there is competition there is victory. That is why courtroom battles and debating contests are pleasant to those who are accustomed to them (I, xi, 15).

If we accept this Aristotelian account, it is not hard to see that the motive for and the pleasure of victory were not always compatible with the causes of justice. As Garner has recently observed, the agonistic perspective in classical Athens was so all-encompassing that "the language of the democratic courts . . . at times placed competitive ideals above justice" (Garner, 3).

Plato too attests to the connection between sophistical rhetoric and athletic competition. In fact, he refers to the sophist as an athlete of words (*peri logous en tis ath-*

letes) (*Sophist* 231d-e). However, Plato, who was appalled by most things in this world, disapproves of the combative character of sophistical rhetoric. But just the same, his testimony is useful in demonstrating our point. In the *Theaetetus*, he has Socrates critique part of his exchange with Theodorus on the grounds that it is overly competitive and insufficiently reflective: "We seem to be acting like professional debaters... and we do not see that we, who claim to be not contestants for a prize but lovers of wisdom (*ou phaskontes agonistai alla philosophoi*, are doing just what those ingenious persons do" (164c-d). Later on in the same dialogue, Plato has Socrates distinguish between the competitive sophist and the dialectical philosopher (*agonizomenos* versus *dialegomenos*):

> It is unfair in discussion when a man makes no distinction between merely trying to make points and carrying on a real argument. In the former he may jest and try to trip up his opponent as much as he can, but in real argument he must be in earnest and must set his interlocutor on his feet, pointing out to him those slips only which are due to himself and his previous associations (167d ff).

Finally, Plato makes another, this time a more curious, distinction between those who love competition and those who obey the laws. Echoing Xenophanes' earlier sentiment that "the state would not...be any the more law-abiding even if there should be a good boxer among the folk, or a champion in the pentathlon, or in wrestling, or in swiftness of foot, which is the most honored exhibition of strength among all the contests of men in games" (Robinson, 91), Plato says:

> [T]hat man is by far the best who, in preference to victory at Olympia or in any other contest of war and peace, would choose to have a victorious reputation for service to his native laws, as being the one man above all others who has served them with distinction throughout his life (*Laws*, 729d).

Clearly, for the Sophists, to be an orator meant both accepting and issuing symbolic dares. It also meant engaging in the critique of established discursive practices, in the sort of verbal combat in which no point of view can remain unopposed and no argument can stay unassailed for too long. Last, it meant acknowledging that a prevalent argument was considered prevalent not by virtue of its historical status or its logical validity but because it had been tested by and had withstood the attack(s) of the opposing side(s). But if this is so, the well-known account of the Sophists as teaching how to make the weaker argument appear the stronger seems perfectly justified. They not only taught others the skills of winning arguments but they themselves entered contests seeking to achieve victories by overcoming other contestants, dislodging opponents, and overpowering adversaries. That they should have done so is not a sign of moral perversion, misguided effort, or intellectual inferiority; rather, it is a mark of their adoption and transformation of a widespread cultural practice: competition.

Spectacles and Sophistical Rhetoric

Having looked at the connection between sophistical rhetoric and competition, let us turn now to the link between sophistical rhetoric and spectacles. Whether in the form of gymnastic games, theatrical performances, state festivals, or public debates, spectacles were a big part of the everyday life of a culture celebrating itself. As an outdoors culture, the Greeks of the fifth century produced their discourses for the outside; they

literally spoke them *out* there. But insofar as "the outside" is the world of appearances, it is natural that these discourses should have concerned themselves with their form. The conceptualization of discourse as content is largely a postsophistical development, a development made possible by the outbreak of the silent revolution of writing (Havelock). Addressing the Hellenic affinity for form and semblances, William Archer Butler wrote:

> In religion, the Greek delighted in the temple and the procession more than in the god; in poetry, his joys, his sorrows, his meditations, were moulded in a form essentially picturesque,—such as the eye could contemplate; in the ideal beauty of statuary, his taste inclined to precision of outline even more than to depth of expression; in history...he inclined to the perfection of style more than the perfection of veracity; in national policy, wealth and power themselves were scarcely valued in comparison to the floating phantom of "glory" which is their shadow (Butler, 227).

Making his comments specific to rhetoric, Butler went on:

> It is scarcely extravagant to say that the Athenian listener preferred (not merely the semblance without the reality, to the reality without the semblance of reason —but even preferred) the semblance without, to the semblance with the reality of truth. The brilliant falsehood, which defied...logical detection, was the very triumph of form and colour over weight and solidity...it was...the very perfection of imitation (Butler, 228).

As I said earlier, the most perfected form of spectacle at the time of the Sophists' emergence was drama, a form that provided many opportunities for the entertainment that comes from hearing and seeing the conflicts of the human condition performed on the make-believe world of the stage. Writing on the significance of drama in the Hellenic culture, George Grote likens the dramatic spectacles of the fifth century to "the grand edifices and ornaments added during the same period to [the] acropolis" (Grote, 287). On a parallel note, Nietzsche asserts a connection between theatrical performances and rhetoric as he points out that "the Greeks went to the theatres in order to hear beautiful speeches" (*Gay Science* #80). Taking this connection to reflect a culture of appearances, he exclaims: "Oh, those Greeks! they knew how to live. What is required of that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold of the skin, to adore appearance. Those Greeks were superficial out of profundity" (*Contra Wagner*, epilogue, #2).

If Grote and Nietzsche are correct, it is no wonder that the tradition depicts the Sophists as virtuosos of extravagant linguistic displays who amazed their audiences with their brilliant styles, colorful appearances, and flamboyant personalities. Nor is it any wonder that they made exaggerated claims to prospective students (*Sophist* 233e; *Euthydemus* 274a) and used figures and tropes excessively. After all, early tragedy was designed to honor Dionysus, the god of appearances and excess. Even when it came to charging admission fees for a performance, the Sophists seem to have followed the example of drama. Recall here Socrates' complaint that he is too poor to attend Prodicus's 50-drachmai lecture and can only afford the one-drachma one (*Cratylus* 384b). Recall also that Plato portrays the Sophists as imitators, as well as producers of images, who are preoccupied with appearances and discursive exhibitions (*Gorgias* 447c). Finally, recall that he represents them as undisciplined quasi-artists whose main concern is the pleasure of their audience (*Gorgias* 502a-d), whose art (really a knack)

is an art of deception (*Sophist* 240d), and whose real business is entertainment (*Sophist* 235a).

Show, appearance, art, deception, imitation, illusion, entertainment. These are terms that typically describe the theatre, not rhetorical discourse. But with Plato, they describe both; and well they should. As Aristotle was to suggest later, the resemblance between a theatrical and a rhetorical performance is unmistakable. Consider, for example, his comments on epideictic, the most spectacular kind of rhetoric. This is a rhetoric of *epideixis* (show, exhibition), one whose audience consists of *theates* (spectators) (*Rhetoric*, 1358b 6) for whose pleasure and assessment it is produced (1391b 16–20). Also consider Aristotle's prediction that "when the principles of delivery [in rhetoric] have been worked out, they will produce the same effect as on the stage." Thrasymachus seems to have been aware of this notion as he is reported to have been one of the few people to have done work on those very principles (1404a 10–15). Finally, consider Aristotle's remark that the whole business of display rhetoric had spread everywhere in the society: "Just as in drama the actors now count for more than the poets, so it is in the contests of public life, owing to the defects of our political institutions" (1403b 25–30). As Aristotle saw it, orators like Gorgias relied heavily on the arts of recitation and acting to render their oratorical performances effective, and they borrowed freely from the fine language of the poets in order to win the same kind of fame and popularity the poets had. To this Aristotelian view we can add that once the Sophists had established themselves, the borrowing became mutual; as Plato observes in the *Gorgias*, the poets are using rhetoric in the theatres (502d).

When these pieces of evidence are put together, they point to a close connection between some forms of sophistical rhetoric and dramatic spectacles. Insofar as the Sophists turned rhetoric itself into a spectacular enterprise, they can be said to have imitated an aspect of the dramatic tradition into which they had stepped. But insofar as they expanded the field of the spectacular from the theatre to the courtroom, the assembly, or any other place of public gathering, they can be said to have initiated a new kind of discourse. By combining, once again, two heterogeneous elements, spectacles and discourse, they in effect created a new amalgam (epideictic rhetoric).

As in the case of rhetoric and competition, Plato recognizes the connection between rhetoric and spectacles. That this is so is apparent in the *Theaetetus* where he has Socrates distinguish between philosophers, on the one hand, and orators and poets, on the other: "We who belong to this band [the philosophers] are not the servants of our arguments, but the arguments are, as it were, our servants, and each of them must await our pleasure to be finished; for we have neither judge, nor…any spectator (*oute gar dikastes oute theates*) set over us to censure and rule us (173c). In the *Republic*, he makes yet another distinction, this time between philosophers, on the one hand, and lovers of spectacles, the arts, and action (*philotheamones te kai philotechnous kai practikous*), on the other:

> The lovers of sounds and sights delight in beautiful tones and colors and shapes and everything that art fashions out of these, but their thought is incapable of apprehending and taking delight in the nature of the beautiful itself (476b).

Focusing more sharply on the lovers of sounds (*philekooi*), Plato argues that "you couldn't induce them to attend a serious debate or any such entertainment, but as if they had farmed out their ears to listen to every chorus in the land they run about all the Dionysiac festivals, never missing one" (475d). In contrast to these spectacle-loving simpletons, philosophers are enamored of the spectacle of the truth (*tous tes*

aletheias philotheamonas (475e). Conceiving of public pleasure as a means to public improvement, Plato argues in the *Laws* that:

> Rightly speaking, the judge [should] sit not as a pupil but as a teacher of the spectators, being ready to oppose those who offer them pleasure in a way that is unseemly or wrong; and that is what the present law in Italy and Sicily actually does; by entrusting the decision to the spectators, who award the prize by a show of hands, not only has it corrupted the poets…but it has corrupted also the pleasures of the audience; for whereas they ought to be improving their standard of pleasure by listening to characters superior to their own, what they now do has just the opposite effect (659a-c).

As one might expect, one of Plato's greatest objections to the rhetoric of display is that it had spread outside the theatre and had turned legal trials into matters of sights and sounds, as if they were theatrical shows and nothing more (*Laws* 767e). In fact, he states in the *Laws* that the courts have become like theatres. Both are filled with the tumult of the spectators, who are roaring out with their praise or blame of each speaker. So much so, Plato thinks, that the whole State is faced with a difficult situation (876b). In effect, Plato objects to the theatricalization of legal procedure or to what he calls "the spirit of lawlessness" brought about by poets and orators. By making the spectators believe that they are able judges of theatrical or oratorical performances, reciters and declaimers have in effect installed a theatrocracy of taste in the place of an aristocracy of intelligence (*Laws* 701a-b).

Clearly, sophistical rhetoric was not only a matter of competition but also a matter of exhibition. Accordingly, for the Sophists, to be an orator meant treating audiences to discursive spectacles, theatricalizing the word, and giving it power by making it appear beautiful. At the same time, it meant understanding that no argument could expect to be successful without taking into account the pleasure of its spectators. Last, it meant recognizing that discourse was well-received not only because of its superior strength but also because of its higher aesthetic appeal. Thus, the familiar depiction of the Sophists as teachers of poeticized prose and performative skill seems warranted. Indeed, they never claimed that the weaker argument *is* stronger than the stronger; only that they could make the weaker argument *appear* stronger. That they should have done so is not a sign of questionable designs on unsuspecting audiences but a mark of the well-defined motivation to deceive, a motivation tied to the pleasure of speaking. As Gorgias is said to have maintained in reference to tragedy, "The deceiver is more justly esteemed than the non-deceiver and the deceived is wiser than the undeceived"; and as Plutarch explains further, "The deceiver is more justly esteemed because he succeeds in what he intends, and the deceived is wiser, for a man who is not imperceptive is easily affected by the pleasure of words" (Sprague, 82 B 23).

The Cultural Influence of Sophistical Rhetoric

Thus far, we have looked at the ways in which sophistical rhetoric was shaped by two aspects of the Hellenic culture: the ethic of competition and the aesthetic of exhibition. In other words, we have looked at the first part of our guiding assumption (rhetoric is shaped by and shapes the culture in which it is produced). Let us look now at the way in which sophistical rhetoric shaped the culture.

During the mid-fifth century, the Hellenic culture was undergoing a sweeping

change from aristocracy to democracy. Initially introduced by Cleisthenes in the early 500s and later consolidated by the political reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles in the 460s, this change was not limited to the structural features of political government but included social, intellectual, and cultural arrangements as well. The aristocracy of heroes, for example, was yielding to a democracy of citizens; the aristocracy of the myths was losing its prominence to a democracy of public arguments; the aristocracy of the oracles was receding before a democracy of human laws; and the aristocracy of poetry was relinquishing its authority to a democracy of prose. In short, this was a change from the few to the many.

It was a change, however, that was far from total — much of what assumed a democratic character did preserve some of its aristocratic traits. For example, excellence was still measured by such "heroic" deeds as victories in athletic competitions or generous gifts to one's city. Likewise, laws preserved the oracular quality of predicting the very human acts they were seeking to regulate. Similarly, public arguments often derived their efficacy from the power of the myths they invoked. Finally, prose did not escape entirely from the influence of poetry as the Hellenic audiences expected to hear in the speeches of their contemporary orators a good measure of the poeticisms of their past poets.

The Sophists responded to this important change neither as passive observers nor as active resisters; rather, they responded by accelerating its rate and enlarging its scope. In this sense, they can be said to have shaped the discursive practices of their contemporaries. Their offer, for example, to teach anyone who could pay increased the number of the beneficiaries of learning without reducing the number of "educated" aristocrats. Moreover, their use of familiar mythical figures in their rhetorical compositions helped preserve the legendary names whose characters and deeds had shaped the culture's earlier system of values. But the portrayal of those same figures in a different light, challenged traditional notions of morality. Prodicus's Heracles, for example, is no longer an amazing man of incredible accomplishments requiring raw physical strength but a reflective character facing a difficult choice; likewise, Gorgias's Helen is no longer a woman of loose morals but a victim of circumstances. Finally, the Sophists' discourse, initially affected by poetical techniques, left poetry's metric limitations behind and began to turn its attention to the prose of the common people.

In a culture about to place its fortunes in the hands of the many rather than the few, sophistical rhetoric proved indispensable. Claiming to empower its possessors, it presented itself as a valuable commodity, an instrument that both the lingering aristocracy and the growing middle class could use profitably. Caught by the whirling winds of democracy, the aristocrats had interests to protect; therefore, it behooved them to learn how to persuade large juries and legislative assemblies of commoners to vote the "right" way. On the other hand, the middle class had for the first time the chance to make its voice heard and its will done when it came to the legal and political affairs of their city. In its pedagogical capacity, then, sophistical rhetoric did not so much seek to educate citizens as furnish interested individuals with the rhetorical *sophistic*ation necessary to survive under the new political system. Contrary to what the critics say, the Sophists' edict was not the survival of the fittest but fitting as many as possible for survival.

At the same time, sophistical rhetoric helped strengthen the newly instituted democracy by forging a mentality aware of the centrality of persuasion in the coordination of sociopolitical action, and in the resolution of human conflicts. At the very least, this mentality was consistent with the partial empowerment of the traditionally

weak and the partial disempowerment of the hitherto powerful. By enabling more people to enter the contests of public life, sophistical rhetoric created at least two possibilities: first, the possibility of the weaker challenging, or at least checking, the stronger; and second, the possibility of renewing calcified discursive formations and sclerotic institutions. Together, these two possibilities spelled out a new world and called into question the one already in place. But despite its democratizing function, sophistical rhetoric preserved aspects of its aristocratic character as it crowned *logos* the new master, a master whom all had to serve but whom only few could serve with distinction.

By opening the gates of education to nonaristocrats, then, sophistical rhetoric produced new ways of thought and action, the kind that are not always received well by all. A few examples from Plato and others suffice to inform us about the impact of the Sophists on the minds of their critics. In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates complains that the Sophists "go into any one of the cities and persuade the young men, who can associate with whomsoever they wish among their fellow citizens, to give up the association with those men and associate with them and pay them money and be grateful besides" (19d-e). In effect, Plato argues that the Sophists are like vandals who invade the cities and destabilize them, either by depleting their human resources or by pitting the younger generation against the older.

On another note, Plato treats the Sophists as a contagious disease with detrimental effects. As Anytus puts it in the *Meno*, "May no kinsman or friend of mine…be seized with such madness as to let himself be infected with the company of these men; for they are a manifest plague and corruption to those who frequent them" (91c). Essentially, the Sophists were thought to be corrupt because they cultivated competition rather than cooperation and because they promoted momentary pleasures instead of programmatic self-denial and sacrifice.

Finally, in one of his more reactionary statements Plato wants the Sophists either expelled, or killed. The law he proposes against those who fuel the business of litigation and paradoxical interpretation of the laws reads as follows:

> If anyone be held to be trying to reverse the course of just pleas in the minds of the judges, or to be multiplying suits unduly or aiding others to do so, whoso wishes shall indict him for perverse procedure, and he shall be tried before the court of select judges; and if he be convicted, the court shall determine whether he seems to be acting from avarice or from ambition; and if from the latter, the court shall determine for how long a period such an one shall be precluded from bringing an action against anyone, or aiding anyone to do so; while if avarice be his motive, if he be an alien he shall be sent out of the country and forbidden to return on pain of death, but if he be a citizen he shall be put to death because of his unscrupulous devotion to the pursuit of gain. And anyone who has twice been pronounced guilty of committing such an act from ambition shall be put to death (*Laws* XI, 938a-c).

Aristophanes is less severe than Plato. But he, too, greets the Sophists' ideas with skepticism while asserting the authority of the time-tested tradition. In the *Clouds*, he satirizes them as teaching one how to "speak and conquer, right or wrong" (99), "to talk unjustly and prevail" (114), and to engage in the "hair-splittings of subtle Logic" (130). Those who wish to study under them are interested in learning "the knack of reasoning down all Justice" (885) and escaping "the clutches of law" (434). In effect, the Sophists' typical student aspires to be

> Bold, hasty, and wise, a concocter of lies
> A rattler to speak, a dodger, a sneak,
> A regular claw at the tables of law,
> A shuffler complete, well-worn with deceit,
> A supple, unprincipled, troublesome cheat;
> A hang-dog accurst, a bore with the worst,
> In the the tricks of the jury-courts thoroughly versed.
> (445–451)

Finally, Thucydides has Cleon address the assembly during the Mytilenaean debate and scold his listeners for their inordinate love of rhetorical spectacles (Bk. III, 38. 4–7):

> It is your wont to be spectators of words and hearers of deeds. . . . You are adepts not only at being deceived by novel proposals but also at refusing to follow approved advice, slaves as you are of each new paradox and scorners of what is familiar. Each of you wishes above all to be an orator himself, or, failing that, to vie with those dealers of paradox by seeming not to lag behind them in wit but to applaud a smart saying before it is out of the speaker's mouth; you are as quick to forestall what is said as you are to foresee what will come of it. You seek, one might say, a world quite unlike that in which we live, but give too little heed to that which is at hand. In a word, you are in thrall to the pleasures of the ear and are more like men who sit as spectators at exhibitions of sophists than men who take counsel for the welfare of the state.

The comments of Plato, Aristophanes, and Thucydides attest to the undeniable impact the rhetoric of the Sophists had had on the culture at large. It was the kind of impact that alarmed those comfortable with the "good old days" by showing them that the tradition to which they were accustomed was in danger. For conservative aristocrats who saw the necessity of social and political stability as a virtue, the prospect of a new world filled with discourses of private interest, interclass controversy, and middle-class values was a real threat. Naturally, their predilection was for discourses inviting cooperation, not engaging in competition; they preferred to listen to rhetorical displays praising the virtues of respect for law and order rather than the virtues of mice, salt, or bees. In a word, they favored a sober and serious rhetoric, the kind they eventually got from the intellectuals of the fourth century.

But the impact of sophistical rhetoric did not register only with the partisans of custom and tradition; it also mobilized the reformers, who took it upon themselves to critique mercilessly all aspects of contemporary Hellenic culture and thereby clear the path to the utopia of the perfect society. While their vision of perfection has yet to materialize, their critique of sophistical rhetoric did triumph, but only until the 1950s.

Some Conclusions or Openings

If the sophistical rhetoric I have described has been part of our history, it will no longer do to deny the competitive uses and the spectacular manifestations of the word. In other words, it will not do to exalt cooperation and consensus as a good thing in itself or to seek refuge below the surface of rhetoric in search of ultimate or final truths. On the other hand, it will not do to compete for the sake of competition or to stay at the surface aimlessly. To come to terms with the "beginnings" I have dis-

cussed means *both* to admit our proclivity to compete through speech *and* to accept our vulnerability to the pleasures we derive from discursive exhibitions. To do otherwise is to avoid competition as too risky to be comfortable and to suspect eloquence as too beautiful to be good. If feigning cooperation is dishonest, and if speaking only backstage is cowardly, it is time to recognize that we need both the arena and the stage. If nothing else, these two places remind us that a noncompetitive *and* a nonspectacular rhetoric is no rhetoric at all. Further, they remind us that while a singularly competitive rhetoric risks eliminating our sense of play, a singularly spectacular rhetoric risks doing away with our sense of purpose.

As I have shown, sophistical rhetoric was shaped by two cultural dynamics: the ethic of competition and the aesthetic of exhibition. But the Sophists' rhetorical combats did not seek to obliterate the other side(s)—such a practice would have eliminated competition altogether, and their displays did not attempt to praise purposelessness; also, such a practice would have undermined their own verbal shows. In the first case, they sought to expand competition and, in so doing, preserve the sense of playfulness; in the second, they attempted to, and as it turns out they did, serve a variety of purposes.

At the beginning of this talk, I argued that rhetorical studies have taken a sophistical turn. If this is so, one of the tasks before us is to account for this turn. At stake is our understanding of who we are, what we are doing, and where we might be going. As a preliminary to this task, I thought it important to reflect for a while on who we have been, what we have been doing, and where we have been.

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